

#WueHearYou

Family-friendly Leadership

The Podcast by the Office of the University Women's Representative

Episode 4: Prof. Dr. Caroline Kisker

*Hello and welcome back to **Family-Friendly Leadership**, our*

WÜkit podcast. In this episode we have Prof. Dr Caroline

Kisker as our guest, who has been Vice President for

'Research and Academic Career Development' at the

University of Würzburg. She also holds the Chair of

Structural Biology at the Rudolf Virchow Centre. Prof Dr

Kisker will give us exciting insights into how she creates a

family-friendly working environment in her everyday professional

and research life and talk about her time as a young mother and research assistant in the

USA. We hope everyone enjoys listening!



NN: Hello and welcome, Prof. Dr. Kisker. You were recommended to our office of the University Women's Representative as a family-friendly manager, and we are delighted that you are available for a short interview with us. In order to provide perhaps other colleagues in management positions some tips and advice. (01:01)

CK: I don't know if I can give any tips or advice. But I'm glad to share how we do things here at my department.

NN: That's definitely something people can gain from. Then I would like to start with my first question. Could you give us a few insights into how you make it easier for your employees to combine academic and family life? (01:23)

CK: Well, I think you must be open to the topic and willing to talk about it. What is the current situation? It's not just the starting a family phase. It can also be taking on other care responsibilities, such as looking after a relative in need of care, a friend or a neighbour. It is always important to me to discuss the situation concretely and openly.

And that the person asking should not be worried that they will somehow be seen in a bad light or something. But that the situation is openly discussed in order to find a common solution. That would be my main concern. How does the person in question imagine how things should continue and how can this be reconciled with the tasks that the person performs here.

NN: In your opinion, what is the most important aspect of a manager's attitude in order to be able to lead in a family-friendly way? (02:18)

CK: You must simply take a look at the expectations of the person who is perhaps looking forward to having a child and of course has a certain idea of how things should proceed. What I also hope is that the person is aware that certain work procedures still have to be carried out. So I think we really need to analyse things first. There is also a difference between a pregnant woman and an expectant father. Both have a right to discuss this and to request appropriate changes. If it is a pregnant woman who is working in the laboratory, it is also very important to discuss what is actually still permitted in terms of lab work and what is not possible. For example, would it be necessary to hire a student assistant or seek help elsewhere, such as in the office of the Women's Representative, to make these work procedures even easier. For example, if it is a doctoral student who would naturally like to make progress with her doctoral thesis. Is it possible that certain activities can no longer be carried out? Can they then be done by someone else? Can the pregnant PhD student then concentrate on supervising this person during this time so that she doesn't need to do this dangerous work herself and can, for example, finish writing her thesis? So these are just examples that need to be discussed. I think it's also important to be honest and say that you can't shift all the responsibility onto others. You also don't want the other employees to resent the person who has to or wants to reduce their workload. Instead, the working atmosphere in the group overall has to be good. In other words, you have to involve everyone in these processes as much as you can. I think it's also important that the person who wants a change recognises that I'm naturally also involved in things like the application for third-party funding and that research must continue. How can we manage that? And discuss these things very openly. At the same time, you really have to be flexible. Let's say there's a pregnancy; the child is here. Firstly, complications can also occur during pregnancy and that's just the way it is. Then it's like

when someone gets ill. When the child is born, the child is also ill. Even when the person is back in the lab or here at university and then of course there is time off, which we all have had at some point. I'm also a mother of two children myself and I think my own experience is the same. That's what I hope employees will realise, that these burdens, breastfeeding and so on, pregnancy can't be shared between men and women. But if you have unforeseen situations afterwards, like illness or such, that they should be divided as equally as possible and not so one-sidedly between one person. Let's say a doctoral student in research group X and a doctoral student in research group Y, so that not only one research group is burdened, but that both groups shoulder the burden equally.

NN: You also mentioned this yourself, that other employees who don't have any family responsibilities don't have to take on all the work – or possibly more work. What is the biggest challenge for you there, reconciling the interests of all employees, those with care responsibilities and those without obligations? (05:49)

CK: I think you can promote understanding, but of course it's not always there. My door is open to discuss these things and also to express displeasure. If someone realises: 'It's too much for me. I have to take on too much for this other person.' Then my door is always open for something like that. But I can only try to mediate. I don't know if I can take away the reluctance completely. But that's my way of trying to create a positive atmosphere in the working groups. But also to talk to the person concerned and say that 'It might be too much at this point. You might have to think about how you could accommodate these other people so that the whole thing doesn't appear to be too much, but that the whole thing appears fairer to everyone and is evenly distributed across everyone's shoulders.' My answer to almost all of these questions has to be that you must stay in dialogue with the person.

NN: What tips do you have for employees on how they can approach managers when they have to suddenly take on care responsibilities or during pregnancy and depending on the situation, they want to either take some time off or ask for a parental leave? (06:52)

CK: So I would highly recommend everyone to visit the university's counselling services, which are very good, and the office of the University Women's Representative, for example, and have a look: 'What kind of support is available?' Certainly also: 'What are

my rights, what are my obligations?’ Not so that they can then demand to have a conversation with me, but simply to know: ‘Where do I stand in this whole process?’ Then they will certainly also find out what kind of support is available. ‘Are there any mentoring programmes that might be useful for me, especially in this situation? Career programmes? How do I reconcile everything? What do I actually want? Where do I want to go and how do I actually achieve this in this particular situation or how can I reach this goal in this particular situation?’ A bit of coaching options. From my own experience, I would enquire very early on about: ‘How early I need to enrol my child in a possible daycare and what options there are.’ And all these things, but I think that requires an individual thinking process. That's something I can't take off that person. ‘What do I actually want? How do I actually want to proceed in this particular situation?’ And here it is perhaps very important to go to counselling services such as the Office of the Women's Representative independently of me in order to have a neutral person. At the end of the day, of course, I'm always biased. This person works in my working group. We are part of the team, and I certainly can't take away the bias completely. They're not in a neutral situation in that sense.

NN: I think that's definitely very helpful, this recommendation, as you say, to have a neutral person there for another exchange, is often very helpful. We also experience that very often. Do you see any gender-specific differences in terms of compatibility? (08:53)

CK: Yes, the most obvious ones are of course breastfeeding and pregnancy. That's where the man can't help much and these are simply tasks that the woman must take on. When it comes to caring for those in need of care or toddlers and babies, it should and could definitely be shared equally. I experienced this myself with my husband and can only say that I am very grateful for the way it was divided up between us. For example, my husband got up with me at night and then took the child from me so that I could go back to sleep. Of course, that's a nice way to split things up, which allowed me to start the next day feeling rested. So yes, in that sense there are gender-specific differences, but I think that they can both really do a lot.

NN: What do you expect from university contact points, from us, in terms of how we can support compatibility? (09:51)

CK: Of course, good support services and reliable childcare services. Last year, we had problems with the university daycare, which often had to be closed for days for some time because there weren't enough caregivers. I think that's a huge problem. If I could wish something at this point, I would really like to see reliable all-day childcare. Of course there is already all-day childcare but let me briefly explain that. I think it's unfortunate for many people when they are the last parents to pick up their children. We have all-day daycare. The truth is that many children are picked up at two o'clock in the afternoon because one parent only works part-time. And then there are always a few children who are still there on their own in the afternoon. I brought both my sons into the world in the USA and we had the luxury of a truly full-day daycare there. And this would be perceived as such. We dropped our children off just before nine in the morning and practically everyone picked them up at 17:45 in the evening. I was never the bad mother who was the last one to pick up her child. In the end, I really remember it as a collective effort. We finished at six, everyone was there at 17:45, we actually sat down on the floor and looked at what our children had been up to and then we all gathered our children and went home. And this feeling that my child was the last one left alone in the day care and that I wasn't taking enough care of my child wasn't there at all. And to have something so reliable here is simply wonderful. In addition to the standard daycare facilities, you really have one where parents can be assured that their child will be there all day and that there will be a group together all day. I think that would take a lot of burden off.

NN: I think it's a somewhat social issue, a major social issue. But I also agree that if everyone was picking them up at the same time later in the day, it would be easier for many people. (11:53)

CK: This also means that they all finish regularly at six o'clock in the university offices. For example, I was in a senate in the US, and even if we weren't finished, the meeting would end at 5:30 so we could always pick up our kids. And that was such a guaranteed time that you had with your kids from 6 pm or say from 5:45 pm, when I picked my kid up until they went to bed. That was the time that was undeniably for my children.

NN: That sounds really nice. Well, yes, it's a bit far away from what we experience in our everyday lives. It actually sounds quite nice for families. How do you think your management style could become family-friendly? Was there a trigger? (12:42)

CK: I think that my employees also notice that I am very close to my children and that I certainly mention them often. In this sense, my employees know that I am a mother myself and that I also ask about my employees' children because I am simply interested in them and find it nice to listen to them. In principle, I believe or hope to convey the idea that for me career and family simply have to be compatible. Because that was also important to me. I love my job and I'm happy that I get to do it. But I wouldn't trade my children for anything in the world.

NN: Why would you recommend that your colleagues in management positions cultivate a family-friendly management style? (13:29)

CK: I don't know if it's healthy to focus solely on one thing. Openness goes beyond several things, e.g. having a family as well as a career is something that – I don't want to say it's desirable, because it's not a must. There are also people who decide not to have a family. But those who would like to have a family should not constantly carry around a guilty conscience that could actually tear them apart. Instead, I think you can be very good at your job and still have a family, and I personally think that's very important. I think maybe I worked very consistently as soon as I had my first child and didn't waste time in between. Instead, I realised that I had this much time in the day, and I wanted to achieve this and that and I had to finish it quickly. I believe it is compatible, and it is simple. For me it was the right decision. Whether it's the right decision for others, I don't know. But I want to enable others to make this decision for themselves too.

NN: That's a lot you can do, in any case. How do you see the academic system in Bavaria or in Germany : to what extent is family-friendly management permitted or perhaps also restricted at universities? (14:45)

CK: I fear that the problem in Germany is still that mothers are actually expected to stay at home longer. With parental leave and maternity leave, we have really created a lot of protective spaces for parents. But I think that the problem is that you're considered more or less the bad mother if you clearly decide to have a career. And the big difference for me in the USA , for example, was that I was never asked if I was staying at home now but I was always asked: 'When are you coming back?' And that makes a huge difference. I think we women all put ourselves under pressure anyway and ask ourselves: 'Am I being

fair to my child? Or will I see my child's first steps or whatever milestones are coming up? or am I currently away on business or something?' And all this pressure that we put on ourselves, is there anyway and if we can just let go of this pressure from outside, this social pressure, then we would be a huge step further. I had a great colleague who was under a lot of pressure from her parents-in-law and then she came back part-time as a technical employee and said she couldn't juggle everything. That was a great pity. She has since developed in a completely different and very positive way. So in that sense, it all worked out. But I think this pressure that to stay at home and that you can only be a good mother to your child if you do so, I think that's basically an exaggeration and not right. Again, from my own experience, I mean, my children's daycare, yes, it did cost a lot of money in America, but it was more important to me – and I think it's the same for all mothers or all parents – that my child is not placed somewhere but is well cared for and feels comfortable there. And things were done in daycare that we can't do here. That's why I still don't think I was a bad mum for sending my child to daycare. In winter, for example, they had a sandpit that stood on legs. Flour was poured into it and then the children had the choice of red or blue food colouring, which was then poured in. Then, in the evening, I'd take either a pink or a light blue child home with me. They'd never do that at home – they'd spend three weeks cleaning their house or flat just to make it possible for their child to play with it for fifteen minutes. So to say, that I am the best person for my child, I would probably agree with that because I love my child more than anything. But others, who are well trained, can do that too and can also take great care of the child. It is important that we also have this kind of childcare and that there are staff member and that there is a childcare ratio that works well. So that was important to me in the USA, for example, that there is continuity. That the staff changes are not often, that the children can have people there they can relate to.

NN: Yes, this is very important for the children and also for the parents, because it simply gives them a reassuring feeling. (17:47)

CK: Absolutely and I don't want to rave too much about America, but this daycare was also on campus and then they had an extra room with a rocking chair and one time they called me and told me 'We believe your child is hungry.' Because in America you start

daycare much earlier. So my younger son started daycare when he was five months old. Then I went there and breastfed him and then went back to work.

NN: That sounds like it could be a role model for us too, here now in Bavaria, in Würzburg, in Germany - wherever- where we can learn a lot. So that in any case would be a bit of a best practice example for you, for us too (18:25)

CK: Yes, definitely. So I think, especially with my younger son – with the older one, we moved from California to the East Coast. That means there were a lot of radical changes. But with the younger one, he was constantly looked after in this daycare until he was four years old, when we moved back to Germany and he felt incredibly comfortable there.

NN: If you had another wish as to how the compatibility of science and family can be improved, what would you wish for from your colleagues in the university management or from politicians? What measures? (19:01)

CK: I really believe that many would benefit greatly if such full-day facilities were set up. I think that at the moment in Germany, because the shortage of daycare is simply so immense, the guarantee of a place is available only after one year, if I'm not mistaken. If I could absolutely wish for something, then I would wish for the parents to have the guarantee after six months, so that they could simply decide freely how they wish to do it. I couldn't have imagined staying at home for a whole year. That simply wouldn't have been an option for me. It's not possible in the American system. It's very, very hard. The other side of the coin is that there is no maternity leave at all and you actually have to start working straight away. And you also have to work until the last day of your pregnancy. So it's really tough, not at all comparable with Germany. But I would like to see more flexibility. As far as I know, a place in a daycare is guaranteed once the child reaches the age of one. I would like to see this happen earlier, because I sometimes think that you make things difficult for yourself if the child only starts going to nursery or whatever the facility is called at the age of one. That's my perspective and I'm not a psychologist or a doctor. Because that's the time when the child starts to feel shy in front of strangers. I started sending our children at a time when they were not so already and they felt very comfortable there. This fear of interacting with others wasn't there at the time and then they were more or less settled. In this sense, I found this early

acclimatization very, very nice. And overall, that it will be widely accepted here. Perhaps the worst thing I heard two years ago at a board meeting was: ‘Mothers don't want to look after their children any more and are handing them over earlier and earlier.’ When you hear such statements, you can't help but wonder. Well, I would give up everything for my children, but nevertheless it should still be possible to reconcile the two.

NN: Would you like to add anything else? (21:11)

CK: So I think the reliability of care structures is a major challenge. We have to approach it in the right way and the services offered must be right. They have to be suitable. I think we would certainly help each other overall by dismantling hierarchical structures. By becoming less hierarchical. But I think the main point for me, especially when it comes to families or childcare in general, would be the reliability of these structures. I think that is very, very important. I also hear this from colleagues with young children: ‘The daycare is closed again. But I urgently have to go abroad today. My wife can't either. What are we supposed to do now?’ These are the kind of structures that create uncertainty. And that shouldn't be the case.

NN: Yes, we are still working on it. This is a very important issue, and we also hope that we can bring as much stability as possible. We are also working on the earlier offer, as you say. I don't know if you've already heard about ‘**Studikids.**’ This actually means that we can also provide childcare earlier. We've also found that the separation is much easier, the earlier the children begin. (22:27)

CK: Yes, and as long as everyone keeps communicating with each other and is open about what their needs are without trying to fulfil them at the expense of others. I think we're on a really good path. I think we need to do a lot more of that and then get rid of this bad conscience. We already do that well ourselves; we don't need any external help for that.

NN: No, that's very true. And we definitely provide very good support there too. Thank you very much for the interview and your honest answers. (22:59)

CK: Thank you very much. I really enjoyed it.

*That was our fascinating discussion with **Prof. Dr. Kisker** on family-friendly leadership, the daycare situation at JMU and childcare in the USA. For more information on the topic of reconciling family and career, take a look at the WüKit website or contact us at: unifrauenbeauftragte@uni-wuerzburg.de. Be sure to visit the website of the university's women's representative and take advantage of the services offered. Interested in a specific topic? Or want to share your opinion on the podcast topics? Just send us a message. Many thanks to all our listeners for tuning in – see you next time!*